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Karen Jaehne; Schrader

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NOTES

Biographical and production data, as well as Paul Cox's quoted statements, come from the following:

Anthony Fabian-Reinstein, "Australian Film Industry Part V: Director Paul Cox: Busy Making Films . . . With A Little Help From His Friends," *UCLA Daily Bruin*, November 11, 1985.

Karen Jaehne, "Coming Up Roses: Director Paul Cox, Man of 'Flowers'," *The Washington Post*, July 7, 1985.

Raymond Stanley, "Cox, Hargreaves Work Together On 'My First Wife,' My Most Commercial Yet, Says Dutch-Born Director," *Screen International*, May 12, 1984.

_____, "Paul Cox," *Lonely Hearts* biographical note, Samuel Goldwyn Company, 1983.

David Stratton, "Shooting Wraps On 'Cactus,'" *Variety*, November 7, 1985.

Lawrence Van Gelder, "Paul Cox's Films Explore The Inner Man," *The New York Times*, December 16, 1984.

The Samuel Goldwyn Company distributes *Lonely Hearts* in the United States. The American distributor of *Man of Flowers*, *My First Wife*, and *Cactus* is Spectrafilm.

KAREN JAEHNE

Schrader's *Mishima*: An Interview

For about ten years, Paul Schrader and his brother, screenwriter Leonard Schrader, have worked on a film about the Japanese writer Yukio Mishima. After producing 40 novels, 18 plays and 20 volumes of short stories and essays, Mishima committed *seppuku* (ritual suicide) in the office of the highest-ranking military officer of Japan. Mishima flaunted a self-styled samurai image, with a claimed devotion to the Emperor, but it was laced with

homosexuality, despite his wife and two children. He held the allegiance of a corps of cadets he had trained to follow him around—the Shield Society. Out of such potentially controversial and colorful biographical details, the Schraders could have made a bot-boiler that would have titillated the world.

Leonard Schrader lived and studied and married in Japan; Paul Schrader knew Japan fairly well from his study of Japanese cinema and his first screenwriting credit for *The Yakuza* (1975). Their interest in Mishima led them into long negotiations with Mishima's widow and with his literary executor, a Korean named Shiragi. Ultimately, they created not the simmering, gay-bashing bio-pic the world had expected but rather a coolly modernistic and abstract study of Mishima's life reflected through his literary interests—manifested in slices of drama drawn and condensed from three novels that were not put off limits by Mishima's family (who were censoring all the salaciously appealing aspects of his life). *The Temple of the Golden Pavillion* (1956) set up the "chapter" in the film entitled "Beauty," in which beauty becomes the hero's enemy. From *Kyoko's House* (1959) came the chapter "Art," in which a debilitating sadomasochistic relationship rises out of economic necessity. *Runaway Horses* (1969) yielded "Action," about a fiery young would-be assassin intent on striking a blow against capitalism. Finally, in "The Harmony of Pen and Sword," Schra-



der ties up all the conclusions to the previous chapters along with Mishima's kamikaze mission to exhort the troops ending in his *seppuku*—an apotheosis of creative carnage. In the following interview, Schrader discusses many of the problems of making the film, his own conception of Mishima, and Japan's problem with the man.

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What was the source of your interest in Yukio Mishima?

The entire world knew of his death. It struck people interested in Japan, in particular, because he was possibly the most important or accessible Japanese writer, and because he chose such a flamboyant death. But beyond the overt theatrical nature of his death—and life—he is an example of a certain pathology of suicidal glory that transcends education and culture. When *Taxi Driver* came out, somebody accused me of inflating the heroic impulse of an ignorant kid with a penchant for violence, and I responded in some attempt at an intellectual justification of what I had written—which I might add I'm less inclined to do anymore. In the process, I mentioned Yukio Mishima as an example of such a pathology, despite his intellect and education and higher motivations.

There was a lawsuit filed by Mishima's biographer, Henry Scott Stokes, wasn't there? Concerning overlaps between the film and his book?



This suit has now been withdrawn. Nuisance cases of this sort are not uncommon. Stokes has the mistaken idea that the world would not have known anything about Mishima but for Stokes's book, which states very clearly that he did no original research. He is claiming that I derived my film from his book, although we did do a lot of original research. We went into the trial records, where all the material about Mishima's final day can be found, and those trial records were not even available or open to Stokes when he published his book. There are lots of mistakes in his book because he only worked from his memory of the trial. We also interviewed a number of people whom he had not interviewed. And we had access to every bit of published material that he had, so a certain amount of verifiable data was available to us both.

Would you comment on the critical reactions to the film?

Well, critics are always crying, "Give me something new. We never see anything innovative." Then you do something they've never seen the likes of before, and they howl "What is it?" They refuse to take the time to understand the developments you're proposing. You say I didn't give them a lot of room with this film: you said "It's either a masterpiece, or it isn't," right? The critic decides to side either with the art form and my innovations (providing we modestly pull back from the term "masterpiece"), or he decides to go with his constituency who buy newspapers to have things confirmed that they basically already know. Where's the critic who's up to making this film or other so-called difficult films accessible to his readership? Is he leading taste or hiding behind what he thinks his readers want? And how does he know? Popular criticism in this country, like everything else, is becoming extremely conservative, or just lazy.

Were you ever afraid of also being seen as part of the shift to the right, simply from the choice of subject matter? Mishima is a military figure, and there have been several films this year alone about solitary, romanticized militarists. How did the Japanese right wing react to your taking on their cult figure?

Mishima was not really a militarist. I consider him a soldier *manqué*. And no, I think that in conservative times, you have to analyze conservative phenomena and take a critical

approach, just as you would to phony liberalism. I'm a bit tired of drubbing phony liberals. Perhaps I and other directors are focusing on the militaristic kind of personality. The right wing in Japan is not just a wing; it's the whole house, and, I admit, they do seem to dislike us. The only way I could cope with all the pressures was to ignore them all. Besides, this is not really a political movie. To analyze Japan in any political sense would require a film much different from *Mishima*, which is about Mishima's artistic life more than anything, or at least the sources of his style.

What is keeping the film from being shown in Japan?

You mean besides their outrage and embarrassment at people knowing that Mishima was Japanese? In our case, they couldn't stop the film being made, because we set about it in an extraordinarily independent and unpredictable fashion. The Japanese producer Mata Yamamoto managed to get away with his end of it, basically because the Japanese film industry is so confused and impotent that they couldn't block us in the way, for example, an association of producers or distributors or studios can in other countries. Of course, for the longest time Toho and Fuji Television insisted that they had no interest in it. They were not about to admit to their viewers that they were part of the betrayal, but I think they are planning on releasing it and making a killing over the controversy.

What must be realized is the way the government has managed to control the right-wing agitators against the film. After a group of them once descended on Yamamoto's house in the suburbs to demonstrate, they were confronted by a horde of policemen—which meant to them that the government was monitoring the house and was not letting anything happen. In short, even though the government didn't like the idea of this film, they were not going to let an incident take place that would prove even more embarrassing.

When Mishima took over General Masuda's office at the time of his suicide, it should have been Nakasone [now Prime Minister] in that office, because he was head of the Department of Defense at the time and just happened to be away on some other matter. Nakasone had approved Mishima's use of military property, got permission for him to carry weapons,



MISHIMA: "Beauty"

to lead his troupe around and so forth. Obviously, Mishima must have been a terrible embarrassment to him, when he returned to the office. In fact, Mishima's name is not uttered in the halls of the Nakasone government. The upshot is that although they don't want to hear his name in a film title, neither do they want to hear it in an outcry over a film. It helped us in a way—Mishima being such an anathema.

Some of your critics have claimed that you were particularly helped by the fact that the Japanese are stone-deaf and dumb on the subject of Mishima, and that therefore you could get away with the approach you took, which is very stylized and full of pretense, if you will.

Yes, but pretense in the best sense of the word. The film really "pretends" to be about something. It's not coy. It states up front that this is going to be an intellectual and individualistic enterprise. It's quite the opposite of art pretending to be just entertainment. It makes no bones about its aims.

Did you ever think it was possible to make a straight bio-pic?

No. Such a film would be uninteresting. The bio-pic is now in the province of television. You have to have an original approach if you try to do a biography. I'm working on a Gershwin script right now. His life was relatively devoid of drama, so I had to restructure time and escape from the chronological

drama, which was also my intention for *Mishima*. Of course, the Gershwin script is much more popular and accessible. Gershwin was a straightforward man; Mishima was infuriatingly contradictory. By the time he could understand anything he was interested in, he had already written or said the opposite, so his entire work and his life remain a conundrum. Part of the fun of cracking such a life is fitting his puzzle into your solution. Mishima was the problem, but the solution is admittedly mine. It does not propose to be the last word on Yukio Mishima; it just opens a lot of doors.

Which Mishima's widow preferred to keep shut?

The problems with Mishima's widow boil down to her conception of him as a kind of Japanese Visconti. Even though I tried to point out that Visconti was old and revered and Mishima was young and, at best, controversial when he died, she clings to this idea of the enshrined poet. Any aspect that rips the veil of respectability and challenges the standards of decorum set off her anxieties about his memory being insulted. That includes Mishima's wallowing in blood and death, his pseudo-politics, homosexuality, etc.

After hearing that you had not been allowed to touch the homosexual aspect of Mishima, many of us were surprised to see how much homosexuality was indeed in the picture.

Most critics seem to complain about the opposite. Many seemed to want me to make a very different film. I don't believe you have to show men in bed to discuss homosexuality. Lust is truly more challenging to figure out visually than sex.

Dick Cavett said something interesting on the air: this was a film that had created a lot of instant authorities—authorities on Japan, on homosexuality, on military aesthetics, Japanese politics, East-West relationships, Mishima's politics. I spent so long preparing this picture that I feel a certain confidence in knowing something about it. I also trust that my brother, who has lived and studied in Japan for a long time, knows more than a lot of journalists who seem only to have brushed up and rushed into print, most of them without interviewing us or even clarifying in their own heads what was, in fact, in ours.

I think you have a very interesting insight

into the narcissism of the military, the fascination with uniforms and paraphernalia, ribbons and stripes and gew-gaws that constitute a Kabuki style of make-up of the basic uniformed body.

Well, one of the ways you can define narcissism is the constant search for a reflection of the body in the form you most desire to project upon it. For men steeped in a military tradition, a glorious uniform is the ultimate crown of beauty. I've always been interested in the character trying to get out of the strictures of physicality, whether that means through art or religion or sex. The idea that the body is a limitation to be overcome, through whatever means you can master, is inherent in my upbringing. Within the struggle for that transcendence, a metamorphosis of the body goes on, as one tries to transform the body into something it can never be. The escape from the body becomes an obsessive devotion to it, which is really the discovery of something through its opposite. Narcissism is simply an extension of hatred of the body.

You show that extension from Mishima's psychological obsession with his own sexuality and body towards a form of action, particularly embodied in the corps of followers he trained for the Shield Society. Was the Shield Society an end or a means toward a political end?

The Shield Society was an expression of "Mishima-think" rather than a political body, which is why it disbanded after his death. It was a headless horseman, just as he was headless, after his death, because they had no real principles other than his homoerotic and artistic grandiosity. I was concerned with the progression from Mishima's admiration for images of metaphysical suffering like St. Sebastian's to the actual physical training that would perfect Mishima's own body and put it to a test that, of course, he alone could divine. The Shield Society with its ostensible social-religious-militaristic purpose, accomplished none of those objectives.

How did the Emperor figure into their "devotion"? It turned out to be a devotion to Mishima, didn't it?

That's a big question. Mishima did finally touch upon the ultimate taboo—the Emperor. Because the Emperor was above politics,

above the entire scope of what became Japanese pragmatism (which they were forced into, creating an almost schizophrenic society after the war), Mishima's elevating himself to the dubious role of the Emperor's guardian and advocate made everybody very uncomfortable. What might have been tolerated within the samurai tradition was no longer feasible in Mishima's lifetime, because Japan was distancing itself so rapidly from its own traditions.

There are a lot of people who have intelligent things to say about Mishima's relationship to the Emperor, in comparison to Japanese society's attitude toward their Emperor, but I'm not one of them, at least not now. That would have demanded a different kind of film, a different angle on Mishima's psychology. I'm more interested in the influence and effects of his fascination with the West and how that affected his return to his own concept of Japanese destiny.

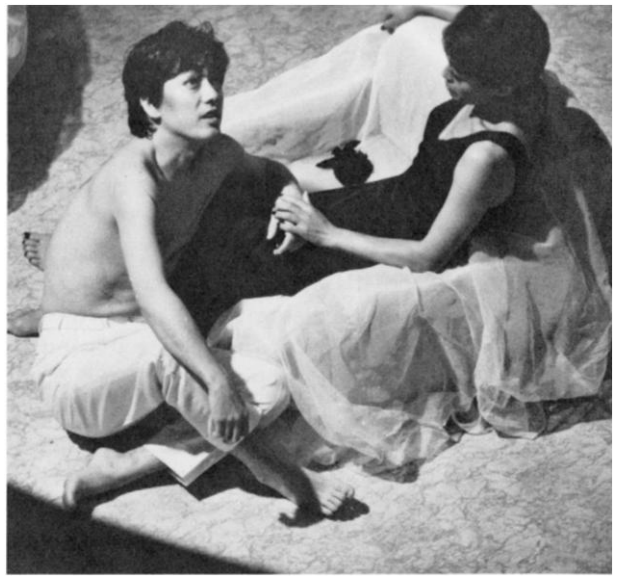
Was he a fascist?

His was a social rebellion with a suicidal impulse, but it did not kill itself, as it does in kids who wear swastikas and safety pins through their cheeks, by donning Brooks Brothers suits. Mishima and his corps of cadets were not fascists. They were some form of sexual-artistic surrogates, and Mishima deserves, in a way, a lot of the misinterpretation he's received, because he chose sartorial metaphors.

He wrote a play called *My Friend Hitler*, and he must have known he would be lambasted for it. And when he designed those uniforms, he must have known that people would misconstrue this as a form of Third Reichism. Maybe that delighted him. But that still does not detract from the fact that his politics were a mass of balderdash. You can't make any sense of them, but they have no relationship to fascism.

What was the point of his appearance at the Tokyo University rally in 1968?

That was a turning point. He had been gearing up for death his whole life and he'd talked about it so long that people were bored with listening. Japan has a sort of tradition of suicidal authors—the list is seven or eight strong, by my count, and there could be more. Mishima was moving down this path at such a rate, he realized that he could easily become



MISHIMA: "Kyoto's House"

just another Japanese writer who killed himself. He chose to avoid that by exposing himself.

When the students at Tokyo University reached their pinnacle of power in 1968, they were on the front page every day. When they invited him to speak, he was excited. He'd had a lot of publicity, but he'd never been front-page stuff. If you want the front page, of course, you have to get into politics. Although he had given an interview a year previously in which he had said, "I have no politics"—and I believe he was being honest—at that point he saw it as a way to extend his fantasies. He could increase his literary stock and become an international star. It was a matter of style, not belief or substance. Susan Sontag defined this style in her essay "Fascinating Fascism." Maybe the need to appropriate others' fascist paraphernalia occurs with many obsessives; but in the case of Mishima-the-Artist, he was intent on *designing* all symbols, medals and expressions of the Corps. What he created, however, was not necessarily original.

Do you see any relationship between your film about a homosexual in hot pursuit of a uniform and two other pictures also shown at Cannes, Adieu, Bonaparte by Yussef Chahine and Colonel Redl by Istvan Szábo, both of which deal with homosexual military officers?

No, but I see the coincidence and agree that it is odd. Perhaps we're getting closer to defining the fascist personality, but I think it's also important to distinguish between the fashion and the fascism. Possibly it's the homosexuality in such men that cuts both ways—reflects

fascistic impulses but also keeps them away from totally straight-jacketed fascism. The military is homoerotic as hell; the dedication of firm bodies to a higher principle? Of course, but there's also a heterosexual impulse that—well, maybe it's just reproductive and not erotic. There's a heterosexual allure of fascism, too, possibly in the phallic tension of the uniform and helmet and all, but I don't know. Whatever appeal it has in whatever directions, its service to the ultimate reality of death is probably what separates it from truly heterosexual, nurturing, humanistic motivations.

There's a fairly obvious transition in the opening sequence from Mishima in a Liberace sort of dressing gown on his terrace to the painstaking adornment of his body with a fastidiously laid out uniform in preparation for his death. Was that a comment on uniforms as kitsch or meant as a contrast?

I put that up front for a fairly practical reason. I knew the film was going to be difficult, and I wanted something up there that people could “get” so they would know later, when it did get tougher, that I was not being obtuse for the sake of making them scratch their heads.

Have you run into the accusation of being sushi-chic?

What does that mean?

Yuppie Japanese streamlined aesthetics—sushi, kimono sleeves, red and black enamel, Zen and the art of high-tech repair.

(laughs) The film is chock-a-block with difficult concepts—not mine, Mishima's—and I hope it doesn't glide out like sashimi slices. Mishima himself lived in a style that was as far from Zen as anything I can think of. He had some very peculiar ideas, a few of which I address. Perhaps by predisposition, I was interested in the idea that as an object becomes more and more beautiful, it seeks its own destruction. Also intriguing is the idea that one must not only be a see-er, one must also be seen while one sees. They are rarified, obscure but artistic ideas and the film goes right to the heart of them. There's no way you can talk about such things and make it an easy watch.

Some people find the chapter titles pretentious, but they were only meant to be helpful.



Ken Ogata as Mishima.

I found, when I first screened it, that when I didn't put the titles on, people didn't understand what the point was. So I give an entire table of contents to the movie at the beginning. I don't think it's ever been done before. The fact that you see the list and know what's happening makes the list a handbook for watching this kind of film.

How do you react to accusations of high art?

I know it really raises the hackles of critics to be expected to respond to high art, when they would prefer to discover something artistic in material with no claim on artistic values. Just as Mishima knew that people were going to get pissed off at him, he would make the ultimate statement of all art in Japan. He chose to exclude himself and to stand alone. He knew that he was cutting himself out of society, and simultaneously out of life.

There's a famous line about Japan: “In the West, we believe that hell is other people. In Japan, they believe heaven is other people.”

Is this your affinity with Mishima—as an outcast-in-progress?

I did know that by taking such an aggressively intellectual stance, I would cut myself off from a large part of the critical community. Of course, the American film critical community is nothing like Japan, where the family is the dominant group. Here democracy reigns—everybody gets an opinion. In

Japan, a play democracy is at work, but not as a democracy, rather as a family. That was also what made the film so much fun to make. It bred an *esprit de corps* in the crew. Everybody on the crew was excited about making a film that was equally Japanese and American. Since that was such a satisfaction in the production process, it's difficult to take seriously the criticisms you hear about the film being not Japanese enough or too American to understand the Japanese ethos or some such thing. I like to think of it as the Nissan of films.

Do you think the Japanese have some privileged insight into Mishima? I talked to Toshiro Mifune and asked him about the personality involved, since he quickly assured me he'd never seen the picture and was very uncomfortable discussing the character of Mishima, which he then went on to say hovered on a borderline between genius and madness. Why such nervous conclusions?

The Japanese have a mistaken idea that we don't understand Mishima because we're not Japanese. As it works out, they may understand him less than we do, because they feel they should understand him and become para-

lyzed over their failure to fathom what was going on in his life. They refuse to think about him. We know we can't know the whole picture, so we treat it as a complex conundrum and see how much of it we might be able to understand with no preconceptions about where he should fit in. It's an essential part of the Japanese character to believe that no non-Japanese can understand a Japanese. Most Japanese who believe otherwise tend to end up living abroad.

Only fifty years ago, they assumed that unless you were born Japanese, you couldn't even begin to speak their language because it was so difficult. Their word for foreigner, *gaijin*, is not a flattering term; it's something like *goyim*, but means "not us." The idea that an outsider would try to do what they can't is infuriating. The Japanese not only don't want Mishima; an even greater fear is that the *gaijin* will appropriate him.

Do you feel a special affinity to Mishima?

After all this, I'd have to, but I've also developed a distance that keeps me from thinking of him as a hero. He was an extraordinarily creative and simultaneously destructive personality.

LEO BRAUDY

The Sacraments of Genre: Coppola, DePalma, Scorsese

"An aesthetic of reality," André Bazin called the Italian neorealist films of the immediate postwar period, and the description has stuck. Whatever the changes in style and approach that directors like Rossellini, DeSica, Antonioni, and Fellini made later in their careers, there is still a critical tendency to root them in a film-making that stayed close to the stuff of everyday life. By respecting the integrity of the actors and objects within its gaze, it sought not to turn them into something thematic or

symbolic, but to maintain their separateness and their unalloyed reality—if we take "reality" to mean that which is constantly evading our final interpretation and our subordination of it to our interpretive systems.

The now-aging younger generation of Italian-American film-makers—in which I include Francis Ford Coppola, Brian DePalma, and Martin Scorsese—at first glance could be hardly more different from the generation of neorealists in their style and preoccupations.